

COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND BELARUS IN THE FIELD OF TOURISM DIPLOMACY (1992–2022)

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Based on a wide range of sources, the paper uses a systematic anthropological approach to analyze the development of cooperation between China and Belarus in the field of tourism since the establishment of diplomatic relations. The main stages of cooperation are highlighted and their contents are revealed. The paper follows the evolution of its contractual and legal framework, identifies the key institutions and forms, and discusses the outcomes, issues, and future prospects. The development of bilateral and multilateral tourism diplomacy between China and Belarus is considered in the context of Beijing and Minsk's political connections reaching the level of "comprehensive strategic partnership featuring mutual trust and win-win collaboration". The paper emphasizes tourism's positive function in increasing mutual understanding and boosting the two countries' quality of life, as well as its potential development.

Keywords: international cooperation; tourism diplomacy; PRC; Republic of Belarus; SCO; pandemic COVID-19.

Belarusian-Chinese diplomatic relations were established on January 20, 1992. A year later, a delegation of the Republic of Belarus to China was led by Chairman of the Supreme Soviet S. Shushkevich [1, p. 39]. It was the first government delegation from the Commonwealth of Independent States to visit the People's Republic of China after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the visit, on January 11, 1993, a joint declaration was signed noting that Beijing and Minsk would promote cooperation in the field of tourism and direct contacts between relevant organizations, groups and individuals [2, p. 72]. At the same time, the parties agreed to cooperate on visa-free group tourism visits [3]. The visit was the first step in the development of tourism cooperation between China and Belarus.

Diplomatic activities of the two heads of state played a leading role in the development of tourism diplomacy between China and Belarus. During the official visit of President A. G. Lukashenko to Beijing (January 1995), a declaration on further development and deepening of cooperation was signed [4, p. 55]. In July 2001, Chinese President Zemin Jiang undertook a follow-up visit, which resulted in a joint press Communique [5]. The statement emphasized the importance of strengthening ties between state officials and public organizations from both countries, as well as expanding tourism collaboration. It should be noted that this was the Chinese president's first visit to Belarus.

Presidents Jintao Hu of China and A. G. Lukashenko of Belarus met in Beijing in December 2005. Hu recommended expanding exchanges and cooperation in tourism to strengthen mutual understanding and traditional friendship between the two

countries. Following that, the two leaders signed the “Agreement on Tourism Cooperation”, that went into effect in February 2008.

The personnel decisions of the 18th Congress of the CPC (November 2012) indicated that the fifth generation, led by Jinping Xi, had assumed the leadership of the country. In July 2013, the relationship between Belarus and China reached a new level: President Jinping Xi and President A. G. Lukashenko of Belarus signed a joint declaration on the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership [6].

During the Chinese leadership’s second visit to Belarus after a 14-year hiatus (May 2015), President Jinping Xi met with President A. G. Lukashenko and Prime Minister A. V. Kabiakov. The Chinese leader suggested expanding cooperation in regional exchanges and invited 100 Belarusian students to China for studying. He emphasized that such mechanisms as the Intergovernmental Cooperation Committee and the China–Belarus Working Group on Regional Economic and Trade Cooperation should be fully employed to promote tourism and culture between two countries. For his part, A. G. Lukashenko stated his willingness to expand cooperation in the field of tourism. In September 2016, the President of Belarus had another official visit to China, during which a joint declaration was signed on the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership of mutual trust and mutually beneficial cooperation, including in the field of tourism [7]. The Belarusian government’s Action Plan for 2016–2020 emphasized the need of continuing to work with the China and other interested nations to build the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) together [8]. President of Belarus A. G. Lukashenko attended the One Belt, One Road International Cooperation Forum in Beijing in May 2017, where Chinese President Jinping Xi stated that Belarus is an important partner in the construction of the SREB and that the two countries are ready to strengthen cooperation in tourism. At a meeting with the Belarusian president during the Second Forum for International Cooperation “One Belt, One Road” (OPPO) (April 2019, Beijing), the Chinese president proposed to strengthen the alignment of the OPPO initiative with Belarus’ development strategy and jointly promote tourism cooperation to achieve greater results. In June of the same year, the presidents of the two countries met again in Bishkek as part of the SCO Summit, emphasizing the importance of tourism as a component of bilateral and multilateral collaboration.

Jinping Xin and A. G. Lukashenko exchanged greetings on the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Belarus and China on January 20, 2022. Politicians note that Minsk and Beijing are constantly expanding interstate dialogue, coordinating the goals and objectives of the global and regional agenda, including the implementation of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative within the framework of the SCO, the establishment of a “common destiny with mankind” and many other areas. In the speech to the Belarusian people and the National Assembly on the situation in Belarus on January 28, 2022, the President of Belarus A. G. Lukashenko noted that the most important factor of Belarusian cooperation in Asia is friendship with China [9].

Top-level design sets the tone for the development of tourism diplomacy on a bilateral basis. The People’s Republic of China was the first in the world to put forward a formal concept of “tourism diplomacy” at the National Working Conference on Tourism in January 2015 [10]. The President of Belarus issued a special order in July 2015 permitting Chinese citizens to enter Belarus without a visa for a temporary

stay of up to 72 hours [11]. This is the first case of reduced visa requirements since the signing of the Agreement on Mutual Visa-Free Group Tourism Travel in 1993.

The presidential order on the Establishment of Bilateral Relations between Belarus and China was enacted in August 2015, prioritizing the development of a comprehensive strategic partnership with China [12]. An important step in this direction was the approval of the State Program “Belarus Hospitable” for 2016–2020, aimed at increasing the tourist attractiveness of Belarus and increasing the number of inbound tourists [13]. In 2016, Belarus and Macao (China) signed an agreement on mutual visa exemption [1, p. 310].

The Year of Belarus’ Tourism in China has proven to be an efficient means of putting the initiative into action. In December 2017, Prime Minister of Belarus A. V. Kobyakov, having met with Premier of the State Council of China Keqiang Li, officially proposed to declare 2018 as the Year of Tourism [14]. The Belarusian government approved a plan with a list of more than 50 organizational, marketing activities, as well as measures to develop the tourist infrastructure and training system [1, p. 311]. The opening ceremony was held in Chongqing (China). A 14-day visa-free regime between the Republic of Belarus and Hong Kong, China, became effective during the Year of Belarus’ Tourism [1, p. 310]. Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the People’s Republic of China to the Republic of Belarus Qimin Cui held a meeting with Minister of Sports and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus S. V. Kovalchuk, who assured that Minsk attaches great importance to the Chinese tourism market and is ready to provide the best services to Chinese tourists. An intergovernmental agreement on reciprocal visa-free travel for holders of regular Belarusian and Chinese passports was signed in June 2018. Belarus was thus one of the first European countries to negotiate a reciprocal visa-free agreement with China.

Belarusian institutions in China, particularly the embassy, also took part in various Year of Tourism events, including arranging a photo exhibition showcasing Belarusian castle culture, a photo contest called “Belarus Forever”, and the Belarusian-Chinese Tourism Forum [1, p. 312]. The Government of the Republic of Belarus’ Department of Tourism participated in six international exhibitions to promote Belarusian tourist resources. In addition, this structure actively promoted the “China Friendly” project, creating a version of its website in Chinese with a culinary menu and audio guide services. Belarusian banks strengthened cooperation with the national payment system of the China to improve services for tourists. First Deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism V. Durnov stated at the Year of Tourism’s concluding ceremony (December 2018) that the number of Chinese visitors visiting Belarus in the first ten months of 2018 increased by 12% over the last year [15].

In January 2021, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus approved the State program “Belarus Hospitable” for 2021–2025 [16]. The development of inbound and domestic tourism, boosting the competitiveness of tourist services, and promoting national tourist brands in the global market were the top priorities. In December 2021, President of Belarus A. G. Lukashenko signed a directive “On the development of bilateral relations between Belarus and China” aimed at further deepening the strategic partnership between Belarus and China in a wide range of areas for five years, including in the field of health tourism [17].

The Intergovernmental Committee on China–Belarus Cooperation has become an important communication mechanism in the tourism sector. The Program for Development of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for 2014–2018 will be launched as a consequence of negotiations between Premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang and Prime Minister of Belarus M. V. Myasnikovich. In September 2014, a new structure was established to improve the planning and management of cooperation activities. Trade and business, scientific and technical cooperation, education, culture, and security were the five commissioners that made up the Committee [18]. Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism of China Xuya Zhang, Minister of Culture of Belarus Yu. Bondar, and Deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism of Belarus M. Portny attended the third meeting of the Subcommittee on Cultural Cooperation in 2019. Representatives of the tourism sector of both countries discussed the development of cooperation within the framework of this structure for the first time. Xu Zhang, Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China, and V. Gromada, First Deputy Minister of Culture of the Republic of Belarus, were invited to the fourth meeting by video meeting (2021) [19]. The participants emphasized the importance of summarizing and developing the accumulated practical experience, as well as the importance of the Subcommittee as a platform for strengthening mutual cooperation in the field of culture and its component – tourism, as part of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

Regional cooperation is an important area of tourism diplomacy. In the year 2017, a group from Jiangsu Province, led by Vice-Governor Qiulin Ma, visited Mogilev and signed a Memorandum of Cooperation [1, p. 314], and a mission from Brest signed a similar contract during their visit to Anhui Province. In 2019, Minsk hosted a presentation of the tourist potential of the Chinese city of Weihai, and signed documents for cooperation in the tourism sector. The Belarus–China Friendship Society organized a series of holidays to promote the tourism resources of Weihai and other Chinese attractions. In the same year, the “Week of Tourism and Culture of China” was successfully held in Minsk and Borisov with a presentation of the tourist potential of Shandong Province. And a delegation from Minsk participated in the business forum “Minsk – Shanghai”, where the section “Tourism and Hospitality of Minsk and Shanghai” and the contact and cooperation exchange of Chinese and Belarusian travel companies functioned [1, p. 315]. In August 2021, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of China to Belarus Xiaoyun Xie, Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus N. Borisevich, and Deputy Economy Minister of Belarus A. Nikitina attended the inauguration ceremony of the “Year of Regions of Belarus with China” [20]. In the same year, a video meeting on the roadmap for cooperation development between Henan Province and Belarus’s Mogilev Region was held with the participation of ambassadors, at which intensive preparations for the expansion of tourist exchanges between the two sides after the epidemic were discussed.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has proven to be an efficient forum for the growth of China – Belarus tourism diplomacy. At the meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of State (2009), President Jintao Hu welcomed Belarus as the Organization’s dialogue partner and called for stronger cooperation in culture and tourism [21]. In 2015, the SCO Council of Heads of State meeting in Ufa, Russia,

decided to grant the Republic of Belarus observer status [22]. In order to develop good neighborly relations, mutual respect, and beneficial interaction in the SCO region, the heads of state advocated further strengthening cooperation in culture, tourism, and sports. The SCO Council of Heads of State agreed a program in 2016 to improve tourism cooperation, develop a shared tourism space, and strengthen tourism exchanges. The opening ceremony of the 14th session of the SCO Forum (April 2019) was attended by Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Hanhui Zhang, SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov, and Counselor Roman Sokol of the Belarusian Embassy in China, while more than 100 experts, scholars, and diplomats from China and other countries attended the conference to coincide with the meeting. The final document focused on the intensification of cooperation in tourism.

Since 2020, the Belarusian Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries started implementing the Memorandum of Cooperation with the SCO China Committee for Good Neighborhood and Friendship. The head of the Society, Nina Ivanova, noted that the agreement intends to develop mutual trust, establish collaborations between civil society organizations, promote cultural, sports, and tourist projects, and organize mutual dialogues on the aforementioned themes.

The role of the SCO Forum in addressing the pandemic's impacts, notably in the sphere of tourism, was considered at the 15th meeting of the SCO Forum (2020). According to SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov, the organization has great potential and will continue to work on combating the consequences of COVID-19. The purpose of the meeting of the heads of tourism administrations of SCO member states (2021, Dushanbe), which included Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism of China Xu Zhang and Head of Department of the Ministry of Sports and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus Brinkevich, was to develop a plan of joint actions in a new environment in order to implement the Program to develop cooperation of SCO member states in the field of tourism for 2022–2023, which will attract additional tourist flows, improve the economic situation, and create new jobs [23].

Cooperation in the “16+1” format plays an important role in expanding the platform of China–Belarus cooperation in the field of tourism. The 5th summit of the leaders of China and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was held in Riga (Latvia) in November 2016, with Belarus participating as an observer for the first time [24]. During his meeting with Belarus Prime Minister A.V. Kabiakov, China's Premier of the State Council Keqiang Li said that Beijing welcomed Belarus as an observer state, and the other side expressed its willingness to take advantage of new opportunities to develop bilateral relations and expand tourism cooperation. Belarus was present as an observer at the 9th Leaders' Summit of China and Central and Eastern Europe, which was held by video meeting (2021). The number of bilateral tourism exchanges between China and CEE countries has nearly quadrupled since 2012. Analyzing the results of the summit, Professor M. M. Kauvaliou of Belarusian State University expressed the opinion that the strengthening of cooperation between China and CEE countries provides new opportunities for Belarus to participate in joint multilateral projects [25].

The exchange of “friendship groups” is a prime example of tourist diplomacy. In 2014, 200 Belarusian youngsters from Chernobyl-affected districts traveled to China for recuperation [26]. A year later, the Belarusian government invited

46 young Chinese to Belarus for a 10-day tourist tour [27]. In 2016, a group of 150 youth leaders from 12 countries, including Belarus, visited Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Beijing for 10 days to “improve understanding of China” [28].

Three stages can be identified in the evolution of Chinese-Belarusian tourist diplomacy. 1992–2007 is the initial stage which content was signing of the agreement on mutual visa-free group tourist trips (January 1993) and joint declarations on expansion of tourist exchange. 2008–2014 is the stage of rapid development of Sino-Belarusian tourism cooperation: the “Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Tourism” entered into force (February 2008), Belarus became a SCO dialogue partner (2009), the two countries established comprehensive strategic partnership relations (July 2013), and the Sino-Belarusian Intergovernmental Committee on Cooperation was established (September 2014).

In 2015, the Belarusian vector of China’s tourism diplomacy began to develop rapidly. The People’s Republic of China was the first country in the world to put forward the official concept of “tourist diplomacy”, stating that tourist diplomacy should actively serve national diplomacy; the presidential directive aimed at strengthening tourism cooperation with China was put into effect. In 2016, the leaders of the two countries signed a joint declaration on the establishment of relations of trusting comprehensive strategic partnership and mutually beneficial cooperation. The Year of Belarus’ Tourism in China (2018) is an important milestone in the history of tourism diplomacy. Thanks to the implementation of the visa-free policy, regional cooperation, Chinese friendly projects, tourist forums and other forms of activity, the intensification of China-Belarus tourism diplomacy became evident.

Over the past 30 years, the number of high-level visits between the two countries has exceeded sixty. President Jinping Xi of China visited Belarus twice and met with President A. G. Lukashenko 13 times during his official visit to China. Cooperation in tourism was implemented within the framework of the “One Belt, One Road”, through such communication mechanisms as the bilateral intergovernmental cooperation committee, friendship societies and regional cooperation, as well as within the Shanghai Organization for Cooperation and Cooperation China – Central and Eastern European countries. Non-governmental interactions, on the other hand, are still limited, owing to issues such as long travel times and high costs; lack of tourist routes with comfortable conditions and national souvenirs; shortage of tour guides and interpreters. In 2018, 3,277 Chinese tourists visited Belarus, thus the republic ranked seventh after Russia, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, Ukraine, and Germany [29]. In 2019, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Belarus surpassed Ukraine and Germany in fifth place. In 2020, due of a pandemic. Only 189 Chinese tourists visited Belarus this year, down 96% from the previous year [29].

China holds the first place in the world in the number of outbound tourists who are waiting for an opportunity to travel abroad again after the pandemic is over. China and Belarus can make developing a mechanism for mutual recognition of vaccinations, increasing airline numbers, and forming tourist routes a top priority. Beijing and Minsk are concentrating diplomatic efforts on resuming and expanding tourist interactions, mitigating the effects of the disease, speeding up rehabilitation, and expanding the economy.

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